

THE NEW ENGLAND  
ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

ORGANIZED FEBRUARY 28, 1901

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LEAFLET  
NO. 95

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JANUARY 1  
1912

THE LIFE OF THE TEACHER OF COMPOSITION.

In previous meetings of this Association, and again later this morning, the problems connected with the teaching of English Composition have been discussed and are going to be discussed from the point of view of the profit and welfare of the student. Devices without number have been elaborated and tested to increase the efficiency of our methods, and, Professor Lounsbury to the contrary notwithstanding, a considerable degree of success has resulted. It says much for the devotion of the members of this branch of our profession that these experiments have been carried on, and these methods put in practice, with hardly a word as to the cost in time and energy to the teacher.

This has been heroic, but it has not been wise. The work has broken some down; others it has discouraged and turned into drudges; and now it is affecting, both in quantity and quality, the supply of teachers of this branch.

My attention has been attracted to this side of the question by the experience of the Appointment Office at Harvard. Through that office and members of the staff working in connection with it, some fifty men last spring found positions to teach English. Some of them were in High Schools and Preparatory Schools, a few in Normal Schools, most in Colleges and State Universities. These fifty appointments represented negotiations with about one hundred and fifty institutions. It is clear that an observation of the workings of this office for a number of years affords some basis for conclusions as to the state of supply and demand in this particular field of labor.

About three-fourths of the requests were for men to teach composition solely or in large part, while of the remaining fourth most were for men who would devote a share of their time to this work. The reason for this preponderance lies in part in the fact that in most institutions elementary composition is compulsory, and so requires a large number of young men as theme-correctors; but it lies also in the fact that this

division of the staff is perhaps the least permanent of any in the colleges. The cause of this we shall see presently.

So much for demand. Turn, now, a moment to supply.

In the English Department of the Graduate School at Harvard last year there were over a hundred men, candidates for higher degrees, of whom nearly all expected to teach. Their fields of study were, of course, very varied, and a considerable number included in their programs a course in composition. But the vast majority wished to prepare themselves for teaching literature, and were determined to teach composition as little as possible, if at all.

The situation here indicated recurs every spring, and the standing problem of the Appointment Office is to fit the seventy-five per cent who wish to be teachers of literature into twenty-five per cent of the vacancies; and to fill seventy-five per cent of the vacancies in composition with twenty-five per cent of the available candidates. The necessary outcome, of course, is that many men have to take uncongenial positions, while many institutions have to fill posts in composition with men trained for a different branch of the subject. Here is explanation enough of the changing nature of the composition staff in most colleges.

I have taken the facts and the figures just quoted from the experience of one University, because there I had personal knowledge of them; but I have good reason to believe that similar institutions have found the conditions to be essentially the same.

This enormous disparity between supply and demand points to something grievously wrong, to some corresponding disparity between the work and its rewards, or to some serious disadvantages in the conditions under which it is carried on. The obvious factors which determine the attractiveness of an occupation are, on the one hand, the severity of the labor and the length of the hours; on the other, the satisfaction in achievement and the amount of pay. Most of the present audience have definite notions of their own as to each of these factors, and not much time need be spent in discussing them. The Committee of the English Section of the Central Division of the Modern Language Association, which issued a report on this subject a year ago, found that the time necessary for reading the themes of the average number of pupils at present assigned to one teacher would be 26 hours weekly in High schools, and 31 hours weekly in Colleges, exclusive of recitation hours. This was based on the average judgment of over a thousand teachers that 400 words a week in High School and 650 in College are necessary for efficient practice; and on the ascertained fact that the average num-



ber of pupils assigned to one teacher is 130 in High Schools and 105 in College Freshman work. Accepting these figures for the moment, let us look at the estimate made by 600 of these teachers of the limit of "full and continued efficiency" in this exhausting business of theme-correcting. "For the maximum of efficiency, implying continued maintenance for an indefinitely extended period, the limit is two hours a day. For fair efficiency for a limited period this may be extended to three hours; but at this rate the physical and nervous system begins to give way." If, then, all the themes that ought to be written are to be read by the present staff, the teachers must work about two and one half times as long over them as is wise for full efficiency.

If things are as bad as this when we consider the factors of severity of labor and length of hours, it is already clear that not much compensation is to be looked for in satisfaction in achievement. According to these figures, the average teacher who read all this manuscript would, first, be working a large part of the time far below the level of full efficiency, and, second, would break down with nervous prostration before the end of the first semester. That this latter result does not always follow is explained by the fact that he stops reading before the manuscript is all corrected. The actual number of hours thus spent is in fact about two-thirds of what would be required to read it all. So the teacher, though battered, generally survives, and one-third of the themes go to the wastebasket, unmarked, unhonored, and ungraded. This the Committee regards as most lamentable.

Whether our experience corroborates these statistics in all details or no, most of us will agree that the picture suggested by them of the life of the teacher of composition is not far from just. There are, to be sure, schools and colleges more happily situated, in which time is afforded to consider each pupil as an individual, and to correct his work and give him advice fitted to his personal needs. But in the majority of cases the number of themes to be read is far greater than can be done with efficiency, not to speak of pleasure, and few teachers can contemplate with satisfaction an indefinite continuance of such drudgery. They break down, or leave the profession, or work out some sort of dismal compromise with conditions and their conscience; and the ranks are constantly recruited by others with their business still to learn. No other branch of teaching is so largely in the hands of immature teachers; no other offers so little inducement for teachers to remain in it till they are mature.

Before turning to seek remedies, I wish to mention one practice that is responsible for much aggravation of the evils of the situation in colleges. I refer to the separation of the

department of composition from that of literature. Here is an occupation which by its nature is very exhausting, demanding a high degree of concentration of attention, and capable of being prosecuted successfully for only a very limited number of hours at a time. It is closely related to another, the teaching of literature, upon which it depends for much of its materials, for all its models, and for the better part of its inspiration. A good teacher of composition ought to be equipped also as a teacher of literature; a teacher of literature has much to gain from experience in teaching composition. The closest possible association of these two activities would seem to be demanded by common sense. Yet in dozens of Colleges and Universities in this country these two departments are separately constituted, and exchange of services between their staffs is looked upon with marked disfavor. The reasons for this isolation I have here and there inquired about, and I have found explanations enough in local and personal peculiarities, petty jealousies, matters of precedence, and the like; never a sound educational principle. Here is a situation of which, I believe, we ought to be thoroughly ashamed. It is useless to attack the parsimony or lack of appreciation on the part of administrative officers while we are ourselves responsible for conditions so wasteful, mischievous, and unnecessary. The union of these departments alone, the practice of giving the composition teacher some literature to teach, and the spreading out of the composition teaching among the literary staff, would at once cut down by half the difficulty to which I referred at the beginning, of fitting the man to the place and the place to the man.

But even where this is done, the teaching of composition remains a heavy and often an intolerable burden, and we have to look for further remedies. In what I have now to suggest I ask for a patient hearing, for I know I cannot expect assent.

1. Have the students write less. The estimate of the Committee of the Central Association, 400 words a week for High School pupils, 650 for freshmen, is too high. We have to remember that this is not the only use of language indulged in by students. Formal oral composition, care as to the use of language in all class-room exercises, written work in other subjects, these and other means must be counted on. The difficulty is not in getting amount of practice, but in getting quality. Halve the quantity, insist on the work being done to the very best of the students' ability, refuse to read work obviously perfunctory. Time is too precious to spend on careful criticism of careless work.

2. Penalize the repetition of errors. Every teacher of



composition I talk with groans under the tiresome monotony of correcting the same mistakes time and time again. This is waste, and to some extent at least, avoidable waste. If mistakes proved more costly, in geometrical ratio, with each repetition, they would appear less frequently. In this subject, as in so many in our schools and colleges today, we have come to acquiesce too easily in the student's assumption that it is the teacher's business to educate him, whereas the teacher's business is only to show him how to educate himself. If we could only induce the pupil to see that the matter of learning to write correctly lies in his own hands, that, while we stand ready to help with advice and correction, the responsibility for acquiring this accomplishment or remaining illiterate rests on his own shoulders, we could certainly accomplish all we do now with half the amount of theme writing and reading. But while we continue to burden ourselves with twice as much as we can do well, and continue to correct the same mistakes week after week, we cannot expect to have spirit or energy left to instil into our students these or any other sound principles of education.

3. Use the waste basket. The teachers consulted by the Committee of the Central Division are almost unanimously against me here. "*Every exercise,*" they hold, "should be carefully read, corrections should be made or suggested in writing or in conference with the pupil, with general and personal comment and criticism." I feel a natural hesitancy in taking a position opposed to that held by an overwhelming majority of my colleagues; yet, I cannot but feel that their attitude in this matter is only another phase of the fallacy I have just discussed, of relieving the student of the responsibility of educating himself. If a boy does not want to learn to write, you will never teach him to write. But you can make it so uncomfortable for him if he does not learn, that he *will* want to; and then he can be brought to see that his writing *as well as he can* is the important element in his training: not our criticisms. Therefore I recommend that of every two themes written one be ignored, only it must be so arranged that the student cannot tell in advance which it will be. I do not so despair of our pupils' intelligence as to believe that they cannot be brought to see the defence for this policy. The themes that are corrected can then be read with more care; more opportunity is provided for oral conference; and, best of all, a blow is struck at the fundamental vice of our students' attitude today, namely, the assumption that it is the grade that matters, rather than the scholarship behind it. Symbols are useful things, but since the dawn of civilization they have tended to usurp the place of the thing

symbolized ; and in the minds of the majority of our students today the symbol of the grade has taken the place of the thing itself as the goal of effort. The habit of doing work merely for the sake of acquiring skill, with the knowledge that half of it will get no immediate recognition in the class records, but that yet it is worth doing, will be a valuable aid in breaking down the tyranny of the grade. So I repeat : use the wastebasket, use it openly and as a matter of course ; explain to the class the logic of the proceeding ; and do not apologize.

But supposing, as I fear I must suppose, that this is too radical doctrine to gain your assent, let us ask ourselves what is the alternative to this cutting down of the amount of writing, and still further of the amount of reading, which I propose. It is the continuation of the present ineffective and demoralizing drudgery. I have no hope of our obtaining from administrative boards any substantial increase in staff. With our present methods, no relief could be effective short of doubling the staff for the teaching of composition in the average school or college. Already we are a fairly expensive department, and you know as well as I that any such proposition would be scoffed at not only by our paymasters but by our colleagues in other departments. Two hours of first class criticism, with the teacher alert and interested, is certainly worth more to the student than four with the teacher on the verge of nervous prostration ; and from our present point of view, that of the life of the teacher of composition, there is no comparison. Let us begin at this end : let us refuse to use methods that prevent us from leading wholesome lives and doing our work with zest ; let *this* determine the amount of reading and correction to be done, and we may be assured that while we save our own lives, the students under our care will be not worse but better off from the contact with teachers who are alive instead of half dead.

So far I have had in mind chiefly that compulsory composition which has recently been so severely attacked by Professor Lounsbury. Anything which a scholar of his high achievement and long experience has to say we are bound to listen to with attention ; but I cannot help thinking that in spite of the truth and shrewdness of many of his remarks, and in spite of the elaborate nature of his discussion, he has not succeeded in making it quite clear what it is that he disapproves of so violently. Much of his article is devoted to the attempt to show that we cannot teach style, that courses in compulsory composition never produce masters in literature. This was surely unnecessary. I do not know any one who supposes that compulsory composition is meant to result in the production of literary masterpieces. But, despite his praise of



silence, the fact remains that in modern life every pupil who passes through High School or College has to write, and that even if his writing is in future confined to letters, his power of clear and accurate statement will be an important factor in his career. The elementary principles involved in this may, even he admits, be taught, and it is part of our business to teach them.

But many teachers of composition find the chief satisfaction of their professional life, not in the compulsory work which is concerned with the irreducible minimum, but in the guiding of those students who write because they find pleasure in expression, and in whom there is promise of real literary ability. Whatever comment Professor Lounsbury had to make on this side of our work would have been less liable to misinterpretation if it had not appeared under the heading of "Compulsory Composition." Here he insists that the art of expression cannot be taught, because it depends on the art of thinking, and that the most we can hope to do is the negative service of teaching how to avoid certain errors.

Yet the avoidance of errors is no small part of the art of expression. Many a man with something to say fails to reach his audience just because of vicious tricks of style that irritate or bore or confuse the reader, and these he could be taught to avoid. Teaching composition is like digging a channel for a mill stream: if there is no head of water we are helpless and our labor is vain; but, if the water is there, we can keep it from spreading over a marsh, and can make it flow in a clear and rapid stream straight to the wheel it has to turn.

But the life of the teacher of composition does not reach its highest level unless he has the aspiration and the courage to attempt even more than this important, if negative, service. The art of thinking itself is not so completely beyond the power of the teacher as Professor Lounsbury seems to suppose, and with this greatest of educational functions the true teacher of composition is bound to concern himself. In no other department does the teacher have such an opportunity to see how the student's mind works, to detect the fallacies which most easily beset it, and to provide exercises to give strength and suppleness where they are most needed. It is in such employments as this, in which he lays claim to deal with the most vital problems in the development of the adolescent mind, that there are to be found the ultimate dignity and satisfaction of the life of the teacher of composition.

WILLIAM ALLAN NEILSON.

## EDITORIAL NOTES.

No one who attended our fall meeting on December 9th went away disappointed. Each of the four addresses — Professor Neilson's, Mr. Hitchcock's, Miss Waldo's, and Miss Mahy's — treated in its own individual way certain definite phases of the composition problem, and treated them so adequately and so practically that even the most practiced and most versatile teacher in the audience could scarcely fail to derive help from some of the many and varied suggestions offered. The discussion of the papers by Mr. Crosby, Mr. Hanson, Miss McDonald, Miss Ingraham, Mr. Lowell, Mr. Thurber, Dr. Greenough, and others contributed generously to the interest of the meeting. The Association listened with pleasure to a short but suggestive talk from Professor Franklin T. Baker, of Teachers College, Columbia University.

We are sending copies of this *Leaflet* to the leading principals of New England because we believe Professor Neilson's analysis of the situation in composition teaching deserves their most thoughtful consideration. A full realization of the exhausting nature of our work is the first step to improved conditions. Most principals are willing to extend aid when they understand the nature of the injury and the wisest methods of healing. These truths are revealed in this *Leaflet*.

All English teachers in the United States should feel an interest in the new organization known as The National Council of Teachers of English, recently organized at Chicago by representatives from various parts of the country. The object of this Council is "to increase the effectiveness of school and college work in English." Inasmuch as its constitution provides for "Collective" membership, our Association voted to refer to our executive committee the advisability of our joining the Council. At a meeting called by the President at the close of the session it was decided to accept this collective membership; we are, therefore, now enrolled and entitled to representation.

From time to time there have been requests for our Association to hold its meetings away from Boston. While the Springfield and Hartford sessions have been successful, a large majority of our members have been unable to attend these out-of-Boston meetings, and the Executive Committee hesitates to make such experiments frequent. As we do, however, wish to keep in touch with the whole of New England, the Association has appointed a committee which stands



ready at all times to co-operate with local English Round Tables, or any group of English teachers in convenient centers, who wish to arrange meetings for the discussion of English problems. Mr. Samuel Thurber, Jr., Newtonville, Mass., is chairman of this committee, and all correspondence should be addressed to him. Associated with him are Miss Dorothy Waldo, Brookline High School, and Professor Henry G. Pearson, of Mass. Institute of Technology.

It will be remembered that last June a circular from the English Round Table of the National Education Association, was addressed to all our members asking for their opinion of the college entrance requirements and the effect of these requirements upon their schools. Your editor, as a member of that committee, and Professor C. N. Greenough of Harvard, as chairman of your co-operating committee, will be glad indeed to have your individual opinions on anything connected with this theme. In addition to the general subject suggested above, there is a request for the titles of books and magazine articles that have proved individually helpful to you in attacking some phase of the English problem. Each member of this association, each teacher of English in New England is asked — nay, *urged*, — to send in his views at once.

The National Conference at its New York meeting next month will consider all these opinions. Lift up your voices in protest or approval and let the consensus of opinion be codified by us and be presented to this Conference. Address your replies either to Professor C. N. Greenough, 17 Lawrence Hall, Harvard University, or Mr. Charles Swain Thomas, Newtonville, Mass.



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